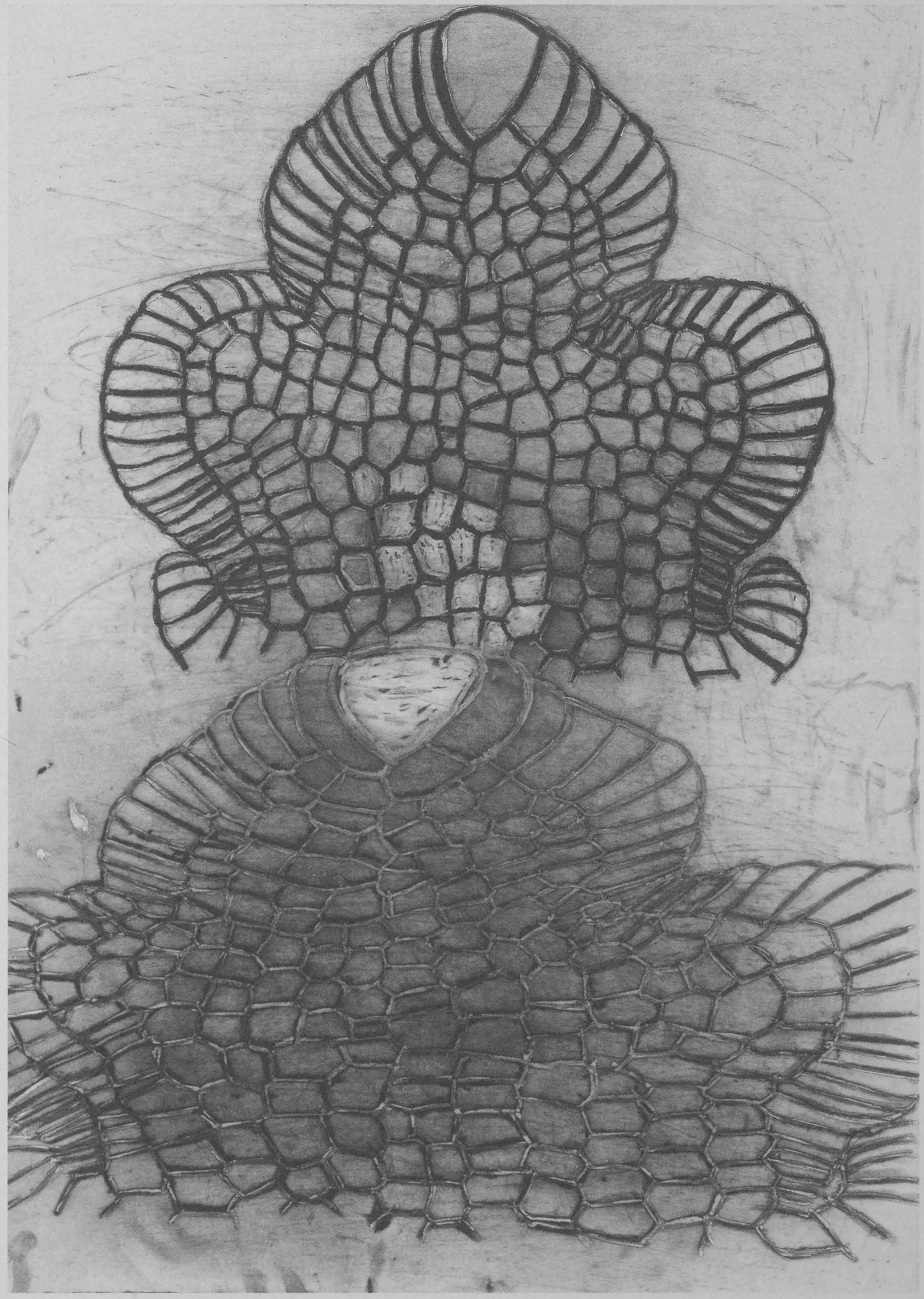

1. Terry Winters. *Novalis,* 1983–89. Etching. 108 x 79 cm

For Terry Winters in Ireland
Hermeticism & Abstraction

Peter Lamborn Wilson

In Ireland, Joseph Beuys once dreamed of an Invisible College come to light and life. No one has yet written the history of Hermeticism in Ireland, which nevertheless exists. It can be traced back at least to the seventeenth century Irish philosopher, freethinker, pantheist and Masonic Druid John Toland, an early translator of Giordano Bruno, who sparked off the whole Celtic revival. It also includes certain obscure Nonjuror Anglican devotees and publishers of Jacob Boehme in eighteenth-century Dublin; James Clarence Mangan ("the Irish Poe"—and probably a major influence on Poe) in the nineteenth; and of course Yeats and AE (George Russell) in the twentieth. This was the Ireland Beuys had in mind: Pansophic Ireland. Ireland as Atlantis. The island to which Kronos (Saturn) was banished by Zeus, along with the memory of Saturnalia, the Golden Age reborn, the Bakhtinian carnival.

Response to the paintings of Terry Winters includes response to the titles of his paintings, which are integral to his work as the captions or mottoes that always accompany a Renaissance alchemical or "moral" Emblem.

One, called *Novalis* set me off on an attempt to see Terry Winters' work in light of the Hermetic tradition. In my first essay attempt I concentrated on the "magical" motif in his work, the Knot (see page 34). But recently I realized that more remained to be said on the subject. Any artist's work can be written about from many different points of view and Winters cannot simply be limited or defined as a Hermeticist, but in some ways he can be linked with a secret current that has influenced Western (and Eastern) art since at least the Hellenistic period in Egypt where Hermeticism first appeared as a distinct tradition.

I am fully cognizant of the "danger" in Art World circles of admitting to such declassé occult influences—despite their appearance in works of High Theory such as Walter Benjamin's thesis on the Baroque, or some of the Warburg-Courtauld school of art historians. Winters' Hermeticism needs not an apology but an apologia in the Augustinian sense. Parts of this essay are based closely on conversations with Winters, other

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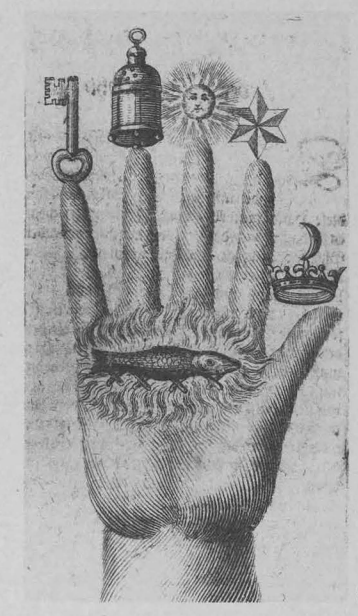

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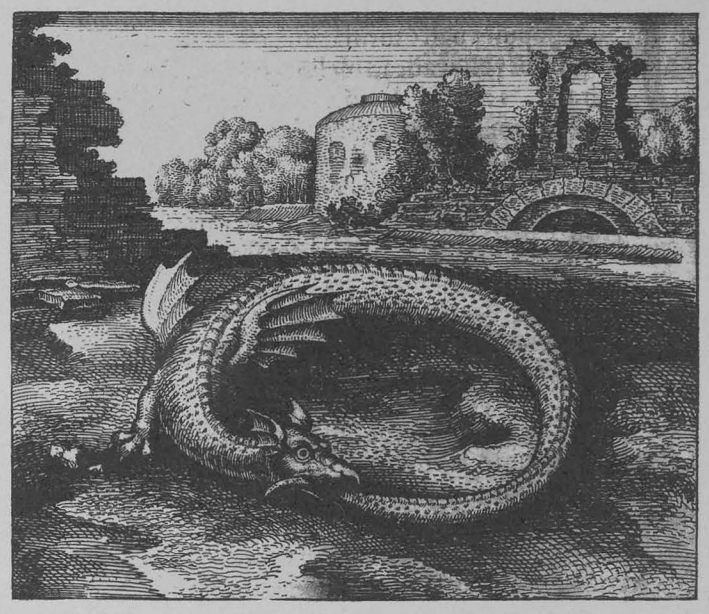

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parts represent my own obsessions but the overall purpose is defense of the Hermetic tradition in Western art up to and including the present moment in which Winters is working. Our conversation is one source of the present text, which is not about Winters' work, but written for that work, in parallel to it, in support of its intentions. But the third part of the text is closely based on my response to the paintings as well as our conversation about them.

2

Choose a particular thread to follow through History's labyrinth and you see only certain caves and not others. *Follow the money* is always a good rule for historians. But any one theory gives a necessarily narrow view of History even or especially if its thread be woven of abstract ideas (ideologies) or paranoid conspiracy theories. I readily admit that my Hermetic reading or "esoteric hermeneutics" (as Henry Corbin puts it) of historiography has at least the same limitations as any other theory. Every spelunking of the past achieves its own particularity and no other.

However, I argue that most professional academic historians have utterly failed to appreciate the existence of a Hermetic tradition in history. This goes double for historians of science and art. These uneasy humanists fear to touch the subject—the occultist tarbaby—lest they be branded as eccentrics or (worse) believers in crankery. The fact that in the past many important and influential people did so believe and that this belief actually shaped their lives and thereby also the course of history—this fact is routinely ignored, suppressed, misrepresented and derided by paid professional historians. For instance: you can read entire volumes on the American Revolution without one mention of Freemasonry; and the few historians who do mention it are usually genuine nuts. Have you ever seen a repro of the painting of George Washington at his Inauguration wearing a masonic apron?

No, Hermeticism was obviously mere superstition. A few alchemists accidentally discovered a few minor things (e.g., mercury cure for syphilis by Paracelsus) but only by dumb luck. Real scientists invented real science by overcoming such piffle in the Enlightened eighteenth century. All spooks were exorcized—even retroactively—and now no longer even need be considered. What the Ancients actually thought they were doing is not worth a passing mention. If they "contributed to the rise of modern science" they're OK—otherwise—dustbin of History.

I call this attitude or syndrome *Epimetheanism* ("Hindsight") after the lesser-known brother of Prometheus ("Foresight"). With perfect 20/20 hindsight historians erase all traces of ideas they despise—and end by distorting past realities. The present is tacitly posited as the supreme absolute of total rationalist enlightened political and aesthetic perfection. The historian's job: to trace the single golden thread that leads to this pinnacle. Someone once called this the "Ur-Dumheit" Theory of History:—that people of the past were stupid. Cave people were really totally stupid, but even the eighteenth century leaves much to be desired.

Example: Recently I stupidly bought a new biog of Isaac Newton. Checking the index under "alchemy" I found one lone citation. In brief, the author admitted that Newton wrote

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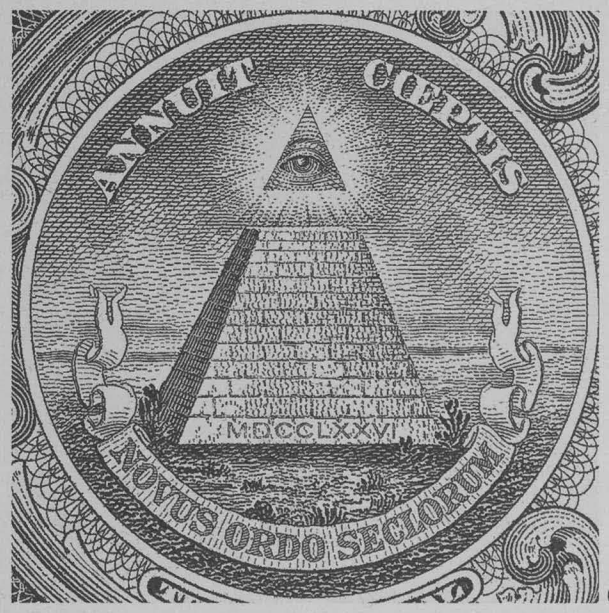

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millions of unpublished words on the subject (also on Biblical prophecy)—which "can only puzzle the modern reader." In any case it wasn't "science as we understand it" and so can safely be ignored. As if Newton's magical thinking could not possibly have ever seeped over into his daytime brain and polluted it. As if gravity defined as *action-at-a-distance* were not a well-known Hermetic Principle re-stated in mathematical terms. As if Newton was simply . . . a bit stupid.

A few examples from Art History. A recent book on Odilon Redon makes zero mention of nineteenth-century French occultism and its probable influence on the artist. In France, where Hermetic history is taken more seriously than amongst the Anglo-Americans, Redon's obvious references to alchemy and Oriental wisdom may have received some attention. No other artist of the period came close to realizing the task of the voyant—to see the invisible and its colors—so convincingly. (Marcel Duchamp said Redon was as important to twentieth-century art as Cézanne.)

A recent big book on Leonora Carrington fails to deal in any depth with her obvious Hermeticism. Every painting is described in painful detail, but nowhere is it said that she realized the Surrealist project of integrating the Hermetic and the Psychological without any flattening or betrayal of either source. Her art is not just *about* Hermeticism—it is actively and creatively Hermetic. It does magic. She may be the greatest modern alchemist since Fulcanelli.

Few writers on Joseph Beuys deal seriously with his obvious Hermeticism. Was he an Anthroposophist and Rosicrucian and shaman and anarchist just as hobbies? a few laughs? To me, every Beuys piece ever seen (even the pencil scribbles and blackboards) appears a stunning work of deliberate magic—art meant to change the world by changing consciousness: "Social Sculpture" as alchemy. Is it embarrassing for art historians to mention such things?

Apparently yes.

Currently I'm reading a big fat book on Arcimboldo—another artist I consider relevant to this evocation of Terry Winters. Anyone could easily skim this meritorious tome without twigging to the Hermetic presence that haunts the text without ever actually putting in an appearance. Here and there one picks up the odd fact—that Arcimboldo met Dr. John Dee and Rabbi Loew (of Golem fame) in Prague at the court of alchemical fanatic Emperor Rudolf II, for example. The text does not call such figures Hermeticists however. The preferred term is "Humanists." Nowhere does the book state that Arcimboldo was a Hermeticist—in fact, a great Hermetic visionary. If you already know this you can read between the lines. For example: the fact that the portrait of the Persona of "Fire" (in the series of Elements and Seasons) wears the Order of the Golden Fleece refers not only to the Hapsburg chivalric Order but also to the alchemical production of gold; ergo, "Fire" is a Salamander, and the other Elements must also be Paracelsan Nature Elementals.

The key to the whole Series is found in the various versions of "Flora" and "Vertumnus," perhaps Arcimboldo's best works (if you had to choose). Flora was a Hermetic favorite; she presides, for instance, over Erasmus Darwin's great neglected poem *The Botanic Garden.* (Grandfather of Charles, he taught the "Survival of the Happiest," not the Fittest.)

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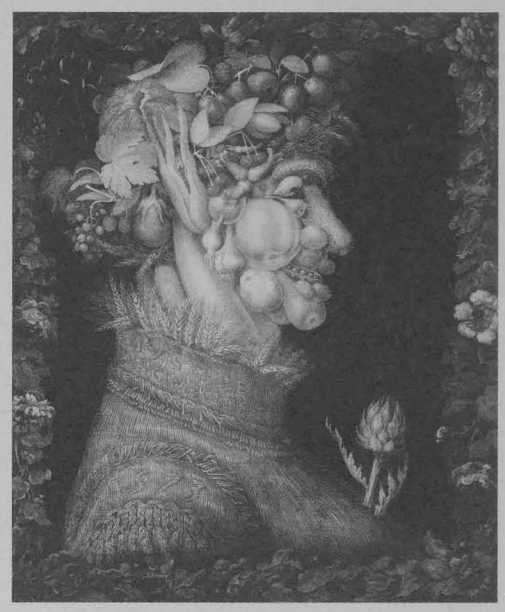

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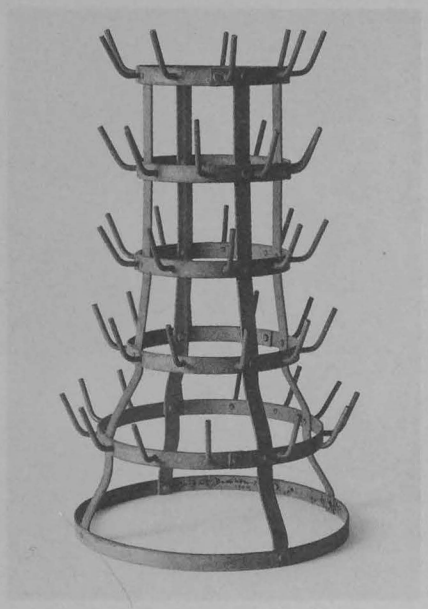
Botticelli's "Primavera" is devoted to Flora in a specifically Neoplatonic/Hermetic/Emblematic or even hieroglyphic way. But "Vertumnus" provides an even more specific key. A very obscure Roman god of the turning (*vertere*) seasons, Vertumnus gained in popularity under the influence of Renaissance Hermeticism as a kind of Saturnalian Golden Age Pan/Proteus or cornucopian spirit of abundance (like Santa Claus). He appears for example (with the apple goddess Pomona) in the fantasy novel *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) in a series of woodcuts that also includes an ithyphallic Priapus. Arcimboldo's friend Comanini said that the key to "Vertumnus" as a portrait of Rudolf II is to take it as "a serious joke, a monster, a hieroglyph, a Silenus." "Serious Joke" (*lusus seriosus*) is a term of art in alchemy meaning that the truth is hidden under a grotesquerie, sometimes in a rebus where word equals image, sometimes in some bizarre allegory. Rabelais picked up the term from Erasmus to describe his own method of hiding Hermetic and other truths under ribaldry and satire. The Rabelaisian "libertines" were obsessed with alchemy: Béroarde de Verville for example published an edition of the *Hypnerotomachia* (because Rabelais praised it) with his own Hermetic commentary (1600).

"Vertumnus" therefore sums up and epitomizes the Four Seasons (Elements, Humours, Directions, etc.) in one ALL (Pan) as a caricature of Arcimboldo's own Imperial patron Rudolf, done in fruit and veg. The Emperor however was not annoyed; in fact he bestowed the title Count Palatine on the artist in gratitude, and probably inducted him into the secret Imperial alchemical Order as well (along with Dr. Dee, Edward Kelley, Giordano Bruno, Michael Maier and other Rosicrucians).

For a certain kind of Hermeticism *there are no ideas but in persons.* Consciousness cannot relate (much less make love) to dead matter or even "things." It requires persons. The proliferation of deities in paganism—including deities of "abstract principles" such as Justice or Victory—is not mere pathetic allegorizing or literary cliché. Ideas are lifeless—unless embodied. Dionysus is the personality of the vine. This is the secret of Eleusis: everything is alive—and speaks. And Arcimboldo invented a new way of showing this truth—and concealing it—simultaneously.

But . . . is Arcimboldo himself a "magician"? The many authors of this book never even ask the question. And they hasten to assure us moreover that he was *not* a "precursor of Surrealism"—no, no, he was a Mannerist. As far as I can see the reasoning behind this odd outburst consists of the fashion-failure of Surrealism and the current high prices of Mannerism. Certainly no other explanation is given in the text.

Modern art suffers the same embarrassed blackout of reference. Klee's and Kandinsky's Hermetic intentions are routinely ignored. I've already mentioned Beuys and Carrington. Marcel Duchamp's interest in alchemy is a well-kept secret. Surrealism is unfashionable because it succeeded too well; the secrets it unearthed and utilized for the revolt of the Imagination were seized and "deturned" by advertising and consciousness management—perverted by black magicians in the pay of Kapitalismo. The fate of Abstract Expressionism was to be "recruited" by the CIA—an organization with a deep understanding of "Image Magic." It's the old Babylonian story all over again: *corruptio optimi pessima est.*



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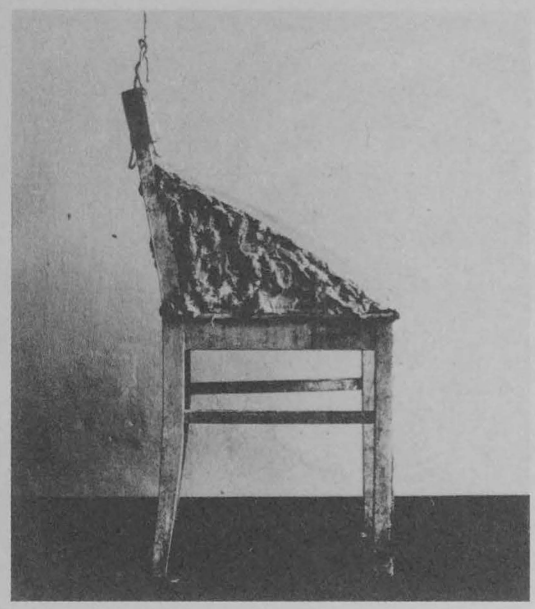

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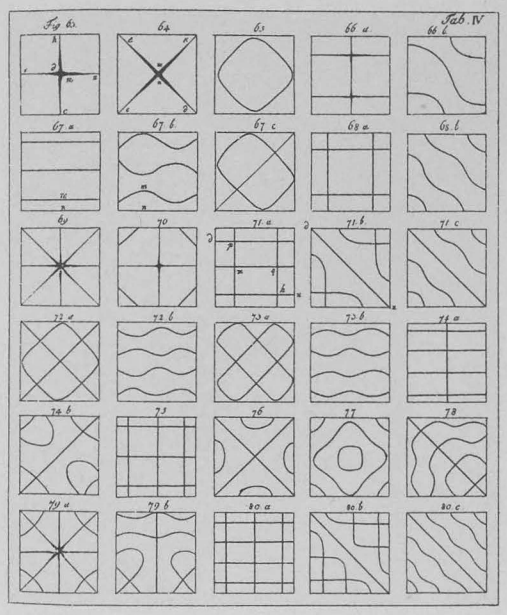
But Hermetic art has also always cherished forms of "abstraction" devoid of pictorial imagery and thus even more subtle in their impact on the Imagination than the hieroglyphic Emblem. For example: enigmatic and angelic alphabets, undecipherable without the key. (Arcimboldo invented one; also a "perspectival lute" and some sort of color organ—now both lost alas.)

In a previous essay on Terry Winters I explored the Knot as a magical abstraction, and in a monograph on the painter Philip Taaffe I investigated the Hermetic (and Taoist) origins of marbled paper. The production of such paper involves a combination of deliberate action and chance operation—and this kind of work lies at the heart of the occult (as both John Cage and Jackson MacLow realized). All forms of mantic divination depend on chance and spontaneity, generated on purpose. In an earlier age the Chladni Diagrams would've been used to tell the future. These shaped attractors are formed when patterns are expressed by sand on a steel disc or membrane stroked by a rosined bow to produce a musical note; different note, different pattern. This phenomenon enchanted the poet Novalis, who speculated on a possible Universal Alphabet of Nature (the diagrams vaguely resemble letters) in which sounds would have definite archetypal shapes.

In the twentieth century Hans Jenny of Basel developed Chladni's work with modern math and laboratory equipment, using liquids, iron filings, plastics, etc. Different musical pitches produced all sorts of evocative shapes mirroring various organic substances and structures—the higher the note the more complex. Jenny called his science Cymatics. Similar discoveries were made by Viktor Schauberger, especially concerning the vortices formed by moving water. Inspired by Goethe and Rudolf Steiner he spoke of water as a living entity, the "blood" of a living Earth—long before James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis. All these scientists, like the biologist D'Arcy Thompson, were Romantic Scientists and thus suspect to the academics and technocrats. And all were obsessed with morphology, the shapes and forms of matter or energy in states of growth and becoming.

Certain odd developments in modern mathematics have awakened interest in old Hermetic ideas and traditions. Chaos science with its Julia Sets and Mandelbrot Attractors cries out for a Hermetic interpretation—and in fact the dean of "Complexity" Ralph Abraham spent years working on Dr. Dee's Enochian Alphabet. And "before Chaos" there was René Thom and his Catastrophe Theory with its charming "basins" and vortices, so evocative of Poe and Lovecraft.

Unlike "cranks" such as Jenny and Schauberger these mathematicians are accepted by the Establishment, perhaps because their theoretical work does not openly challenge the supremacy of materialist philosophy or Capitalist technology. Thom's elegant topologies could perhaps be used to plot the collapse of natural ecosystems damaged by various kinds of pollution—and the Strange Attractors of Chaos may seem uncomfortably similar to, for example, Rupert Sheldrake's morphogenic fields (which are deemed crackpot by the Inquisitors). Nevertheless I suspect that Catastrophe/Chaos theories are already playing a role in the gradual and vexed



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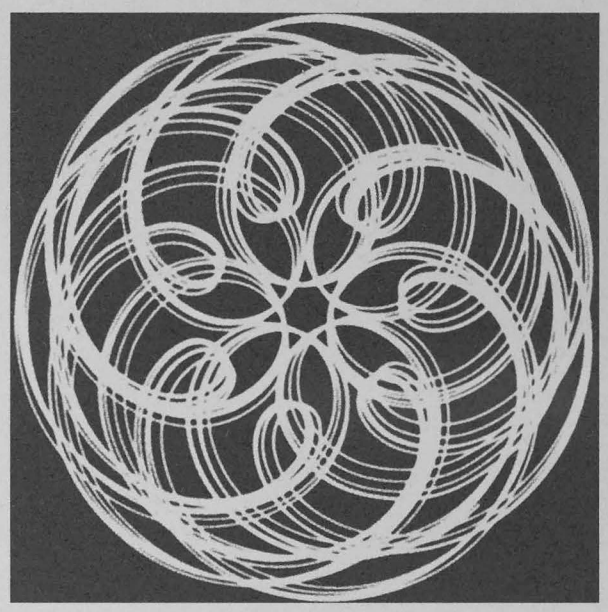

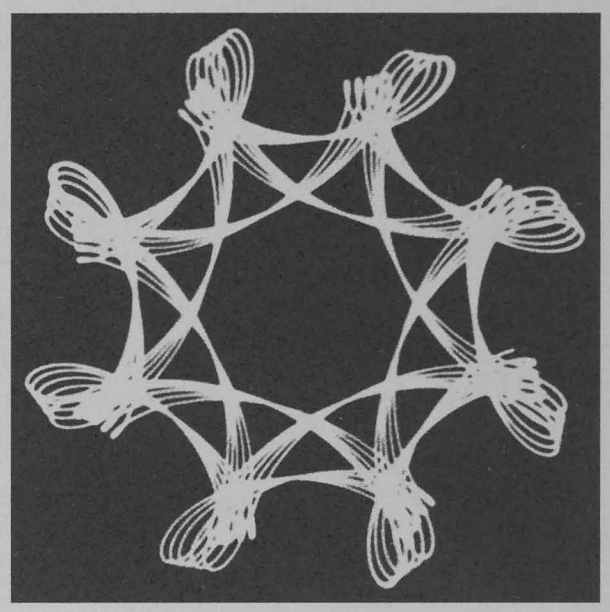

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emergence of a new Romantic Science of Nature and consciousness—and in this sense they are already Hermetic. Meanwhile the whole complex is of vital interest to certain artists, obsessed with the underlying "abstract" shapes of energy and matter.

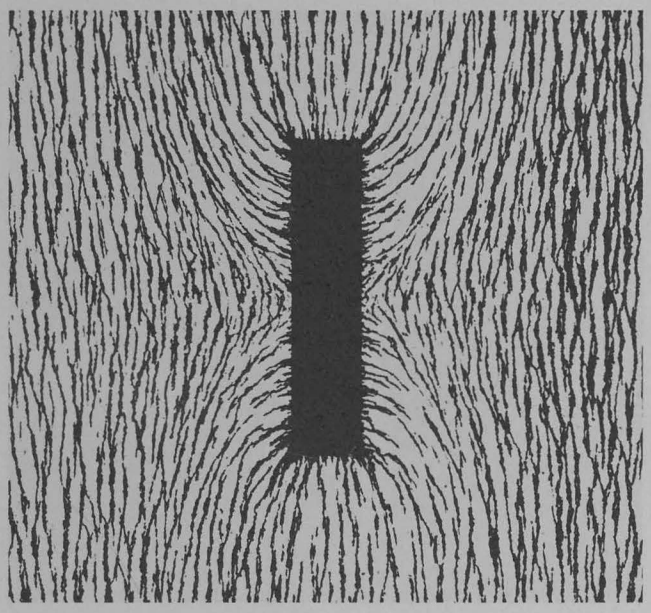
In all these formless forms we find a similar anticipation of the infinitely possible, the moment full of potential form, the sense of anticipation itself as subject, indeterminacy as revelation. Art then acts (as in Winters' paintings) as a means of intensifying the potential for the emergence of that moment while simultaneously withholding it as an occult secret—thereby inviting the active participation of the viewer—almost a co-production of the artwork in an "alchemical wedding" of communion. Hermetic abstract art shows—demonstrates—the moment just prior to epiphany: the viewer can complete the gesture by contemplating the art. This off-balance stance is typical of Taoist, Hermetic and Abstract Expressionist art, including a great deal of "decorative" art (as the Art Historians condescendingly call it). A prime example: Taoist "scholars' stones" which must be asymmetrical and unbalanced in order to lure the eye into their convolutions, concavities, convexities and imaginal grottoes—their invisible interiors. (In the Cabinet of Curiosities of Rudolf II were found a number of "handstones" from European mines, very similar to the Chinese ones. These natural freaks were highly valued by artists and Hermeticists for their grotesque suggestiveness and their evidence of hidden forces beneath the surface of the Earth.)

The emergence of the pictorial image can intensify the magical effect of art, as Giordano Bruno noted, but can also make it dangerous. Images can be used to create a "Memory Palace" in which sheer complexity will cause magical connections to emerge—or Images can become idols to ensnare the Imagination or *enchain* it, as Bruno explains in *De magia,* to the will of tyrants and Popes.

Therefore a certain kind of "abstract art" can be seen as the sign of a magical counter-current, a refusal of the Image in order to preserve the autonomy of the Imagination. The Byzantine Iconoclasts were not simply vandals nor were the English Puritans and altar smashers mere thugs. They were true believers in the reality of Image Magic—just like Moses and Mohammed, the original founders of Iconoclasm.

Western Art historians usually define the highest forms of Islamic art as mere decoration—"minor arts" like calligraphy or carpet weaving. "Real" art means pictures and statues to them. They miss the immanence of the Real in the free play of non-representational pattern/form/color—the Creative Imagination's infrastructure, as the Sufis might say.

The abstract art of aniconic cultures resembles the Hesiodic Cosmogony in which Chaos (envisioned in alchemy and Taoism as an egg) is drawn out into a material form (*mater,* Gaia and the Earth Mother) by Eros, the persona of desire or Passional Attraction. As a modern Chaos scientist naively marveled, "Matter just seems to love form"—unaware of the ancient Hermetic provenance of this doctrine of becoming. Chaos for the Hermetic artist bulges with potential forms eager to be swept into the anti-entropic entelechy of *bios,* life itself, under the sign of Attraction. A modern analogy to the Hermetic *form of chaos* might be looked for in the *rhizome* of Deleuze and Guattari, which brings together so many acephalous and autonomous topographies on behalf of a revolution in



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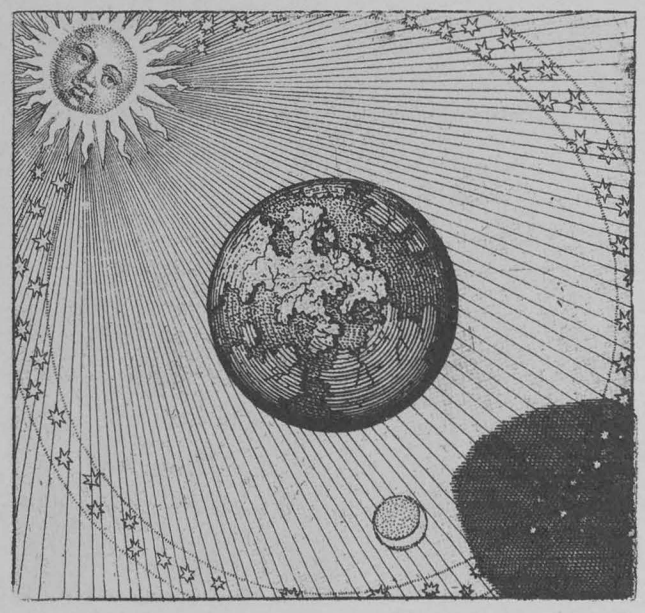

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consciousness. The invisibility of the Image is thus the guarantee of a vernal potency, and this liberated Imagination is the telos of iconoclastic or Hermetic abstract art.

Unfortunately during the Byzantine Iconoclast flap and the English Civil War a number of people lost their heads over this brilliant insight into the problem of the Image. A popular Iconoclast technique appropriately consisted of *blinding* their Iconodule foes. The Puritans preferred decapitation. Hermeticism and Sufism never intended such sad results. Babylon all over again . . .

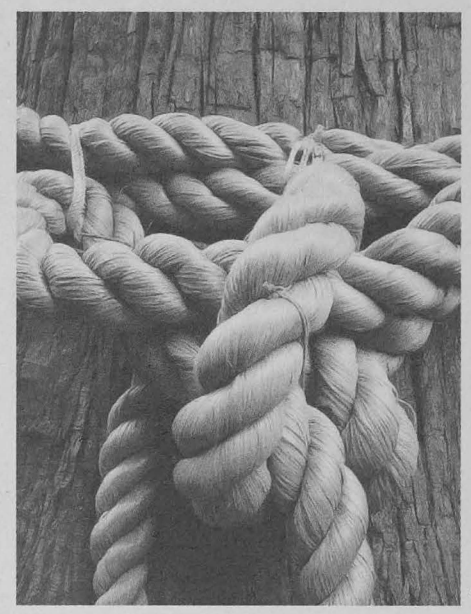
The truth revealed by Rorschach inkblots is that there's no such thing as *no image.* Imagination has an instinctive attraction to significance just as "dead matter" seems magically attracted to form. Even blackness is an image: *nigredo* in alchemy, but also the "Sun at Midnight" or Black Sun of Sufi alchemy. Darkness causes the retina to fire spontaneously with entoptic patterns and hallucinations. The pineal "eye" dreams in the darkness of the skull.

Here Romanticism draws its famous synaesthetic analogy between art and music. Michael Maier's book *Atalanta fugiens* (1618) combines alchemical Emblems with enigmatic poems and musical scores meant to express the stages of the Work in pure fugues. In effect if you open or unfold this volume you get the Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*. It is "silent opera," as the Chinese author Li Yu called his own melodramatic tales.

Nietzsche was as usual prophetic as well as descriptive when he said all art aspires to the condition of music; this remark virtually explains the whole development of Western art after the invention of photography. But without the secret thread of Hermeticism—that perspectival lute, that color organ—it would remain impossible to understand this labyrinthine becoming.

Captions

2. *Ideal figure of Hermes Trismegistus,* 1480. Wood engraving. New York Public Library, Picture Collection
3. *Alchemical Emblem*, 17th Century Engraving
4. Michael Maier (1568–1622). *Atalanta Fugiens,* 1618. *Emblema XIV, 'Here is the Dragon that devours his own tail'* Engraving. Alchemical Emblem
5. *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, c. 190 BC. Marble. 3.28 m. Musée du Louvre
6. Pyramid with the all-seeing eye. *United States One Dollar Bill*. Detail
7. Odilon Redon, French, (1840–1916) *Strange Flower (Little Sister of the Poor)*, 1880. Various charcoals, with touches of black chalk and black Conté crayon, stumping, incising and erasing, on yellowish cream wove paper altered to a golden tone. 40 x 33 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. David Adler Collection, 1950
8. Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526–1593). *The Summer,* 1573. Oil on canvas. 67 x 50 cm. Musée du Louvre
9. Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). *Bottlerack,* 1960, New York. Galvanized iron. 64 cm. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
10. Joseph Beuys (1921–1986). *Fat Chair*, 1964. Wooden chair with fat. 90 cm. Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, Sammlung Karl Stroher
11. Ernst Chladni (1756–1827). *Vibration Patterns*, c. 1786
12. Hans Jenny (1904–1972). *Oscillation Figures*, c. 1967
13. Magnetic lines of force. New York Public Library, Picture Collection
14. Michael Maier (1568–1622). *Atalanta Fugiens,* 1618 *Emblema XLV, 'The Sun and his shadow finish the Work.'* Engraving. Alchemical Emblem



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Knots

Peter Lamborn Wilson

Arcanis Nodis Ligantur Mundus
("The world is bound with secret knots")
– Athanasius Kircher

Japanese Shinto has probably done more for the knot as magical object than any other tradition, and its ritual knots must rank amongst the most complex topological constructs ever realized outside pure mathematics. These knots seem to represent metaphysical rather than merely physical conundrums; they appear unnaturally uncannily complicated enough to link the *kami*, the gods/spirits, to the human realm. They are *monstres sacrés*.

Modern historians would assume that ancient Ireland and ancient Japan could never have influenced each other, and yet the remarkable similarities between Celtic and Shinto knot symbolism might lead us toward crackpot theories of occult connections. But for that matter the symbolism seems nearly universal: knots separate but link levels of consciousness that are also levels of being, connecting the world of humans to the world of *kami* or *Tuatha Dé Danaan*, the "spirits." Every human culture has a different set of spirits, which, to the modern mind, implies that they are all illusory. But all human societies have a set of spirits, and surely this is a remarkable coincidence, implying that "illusion" itself may hide ontological surprises, universal imaginal forms such as elaborate and beautiful knots . . . illusions that may somehow be truths.

These knots are rivaled, perhaps, in mathematical complexity by those curious models of imaginal architecture created as masterworks by the Compagnonnages or guilds of European woodworkers, influenced by both Catholic mysticism and Freemasonry. Some of Terry Winters' glass pieces ("sculpture" doesn't seem the correct term), shown in 2006 in conjunction with some of these wooden fantasias (at the Musée départmental

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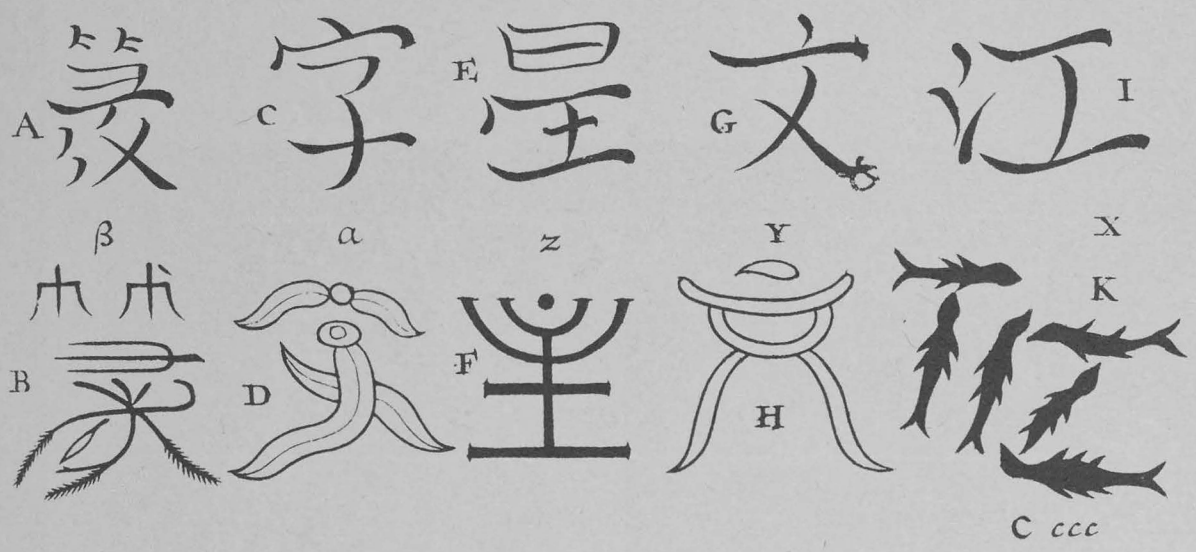

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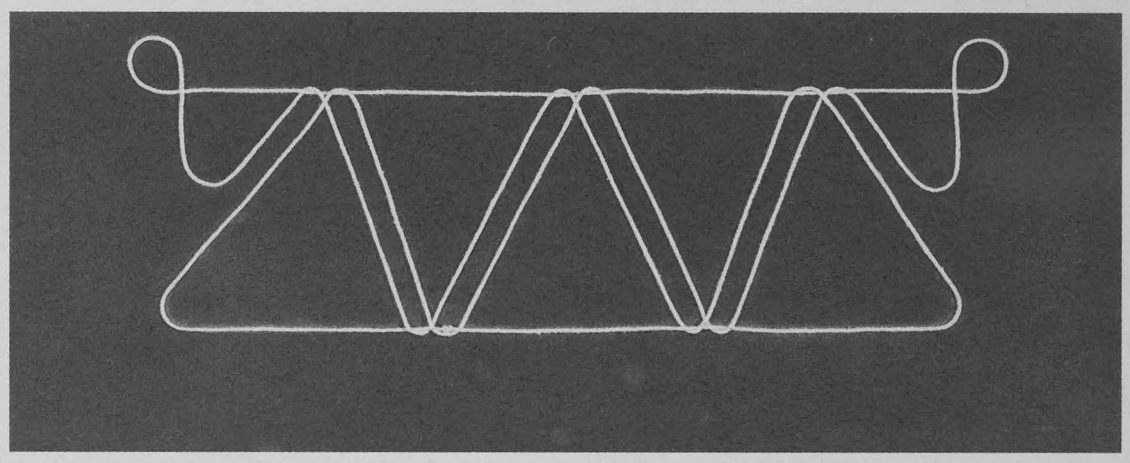
du Compagnonnage de Romanèche-Thorins), appear by a delicious contrast of textures to be crystallized Willendorf Venuses, or perhaps turds turned by alchemy to diamond, or perhaps glass electrical insulators designed by Duchamp for a Dadaist Power Authority on an anarchist planet founded by the Brethren of the Free Spirit. But in fact, as Terry Winters' drawings reveal, they are realizations in glass (the most Hermetic substance, already the subject of the earliest Greco-Egyptian alchemical treatises) of knot-like topological armatures of Blakean bounding lines.

The Möbius Strip considered as a knot hints at the necessity for "other dimensions" to explain the complexities of knotting. The Inuit string-figure considered as a knot *in motion* suggests that all images are topological shapes, that nothing exists but the bounding line, that narrative and existence itself are the raveling and unraveling of a single principial *extension*. All knots, even the simplest granny, express a magical principle; the Arab witch who casts binding spells by blowing on knots (a well-known figure in poetry, especially love poetry) adds quasi-divine afflatus or Spiritus to the tangled line, just as Tibetan wind catchers attract and capture spirits of air, *Sylphs* as Paracelsus called them, in their complex weave of pattern and color.

As Giordano Bruno says, all magic is a matter of knots or "chains" (*vinculi*), invisible lines of attraction manipulated as if by Heinrich von Kleist's puppeteer to effect *action at a distance*. In this sense letters are also knots and writing is concerned (*ab origio*) with "spells" of magical control; the Egyptian hieroglyphs were certainly invented with such an intention, as the Renaissance magi realized intuitively. Athanasius Kircher, that wonderful Jesuit savant, first to attempt the transcription of bird song, first European to describe marbled paper, inventor of the camera obscura, explorer of volcanoes, etc., almost cracked the hieroglyphs. But he failed because he thought they were purely symbolic, whereas in fact many signs represent sounds not things or ideas. When Champollion succeeded in disproving Kircher, the magical Hermetic origin of writing was forgotten or consigned to "mythology" (i.e., untruth).

The most obvious symbolism of knot magic concerns sexual love (and marriage, "tying the knot"); but according to Bruno this is the most difficult application of *vinculi* spells: it's easier, he says in *De magia*, to ensorcell millions by image magic than to make one person fall in love with you—a truth rediscovered by twentieth century propagandists and advertisers (as Ioan Couliano pointed out in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*).

Japanese porno mags exist or used to exist devoted exclusively to complex erotic bondage; here the knot becomes a fetish onto which desire is projected via an "invisible golden chain" that is itself knot-like. This degradation of knot mysticism to knot porn disguises a deeper relation between mysticism and eroticism, cannily discovered long before psychoanalysis by John Humphrey Noyes, the nineteenth century utopian Perfectionist, founder of the Oneida Community and advocate of "Plural Marriage." In effect, he intuited the necessity of Tantra, a secret long lost to monotheism. The great theater wizard Peter Brook used to say that "audience participation" in post-Artaud ritual theater should consist of spectatorial attentiveness, which creates a beam or "invisible golden chain" that



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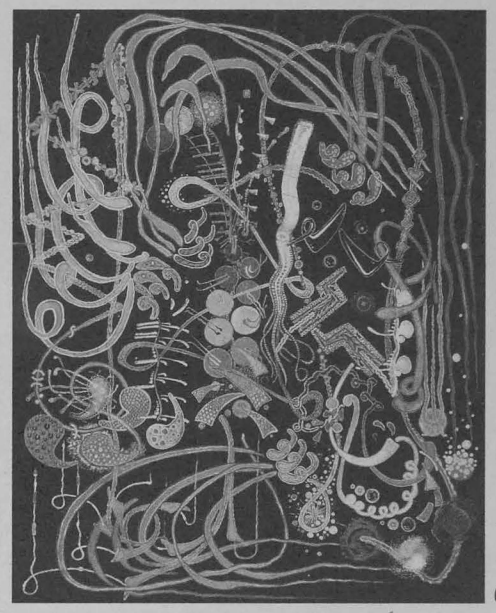

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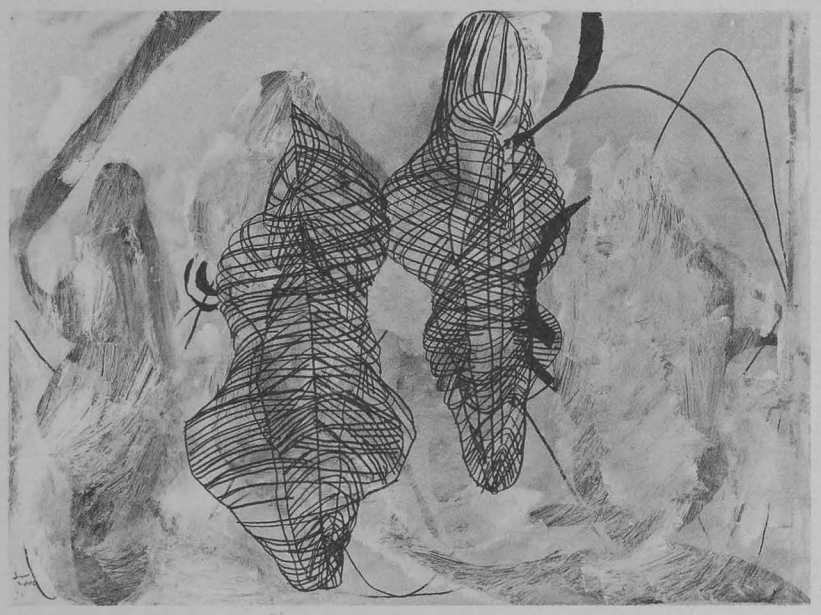
connects audience with actors in a positive feedback loop, magical in effect; he picked this idea up from Gurdjieff, who'd picked it up from Naqshbandi sufism. The experience of erotic bondage resembles the experience of the mystic—complete submission as ecstasy—and of the puppet who only seems to move, while in fact the unseen Puppeteer alone controls it.

Escape from bondage—the archetypal act of a Harry Houdini—is also called magic. If we say "it isn't magic, just prestidigitation and illusion," then we should be prepared to prove it by duplicating Houdini's feats. Will we dare? Houdini was not only an illusionist but also a Spiritualist and (it seems) a yogi of great attainment. It depends on one's definition of "magic." To the vulgar materialist nothing can be *super*natural, while to the mystic (or perhaps the "drinker of Soma") anything natural is already magical, perfect metaphor for itself, inexplicable miracle; the air itself "is" the Sylph, the knot already crosses over into other dimensions. All shamans use "trickery" (since they grasp the principle of psychosomatic medicine), including trick escapes from bondage, stunts later re-invented by Spiritualist mediums and adapted by Houdini. The trance states of the shaman however are authentic, as are the visionary experiences—and the patients' cures (sometimes). How to draw a line between trickery and Art (as in the Art of the alchemist or physician)?—not to mention the line between magic and science.

The Gordian Knot, a topological monster "guarding Asia," a knot so complex it bound anyone who looked at it like the eye of Medusa or the secret word of a perfect spell, could be circumvented only by a more powerful magic. It was not with the sword of Aristotelian logic that Alexander cut through that metaphysical labyrinthine Knot, but with the sword bestowed on him by virtue of his Egyptian divine blood, by virtue of his flight to heaven (or the Moon) in a chariot drawn by swans, by virtue of his search for the Fountain of Youth in the Land of Darkness. The Hermetic Alexander—the *Alexandrian* Alexander—cut the Gordian Knot to acquire the secrets of Oriental Wisdom, which thereupon began to flow into the Hellenistic world via the Silk Road and the Red Sea route from Egypt to India, Serendip, the Spice Islands and China, till a huge East/West syncretism arose, a conflation of 10,000 deities and cults, in distant empires now lost beneath the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts, Greco-Bactrian-Tibeto-Hindu pantheons of the Kushan Empire, Hindu-Arab-pagan-Egyptian-Jewish-Christian cults, Manichaeism, Mandaeanism—Buddhists in Alexandria, Apollonius of Tyana amongst the Indian gymnosophists, a whole universe of religious universalism spread from Ireland (where the Celtic god Lugh was recognized as Hermes/Thoth) to India (where Hermes is Budh, the planet Mercury) to China, which shares the alchemical sulphur/mercury theory with Greco-Indian culture. Even Japan can't be left out of this loop. One of the most important collections of early Persian art has been held in a Japanese temple (the Shosoin) since the tenth century. The Japanese garden is not unrelated to the Persian garden. Japanese Buddhist sculpture is influenced by Greco-Bactrian styles. And so on and so on, etc., all thanks to cutting that Gordian Knot.

The "knots" in Terry Winters' paintings and drawings recall the *gul* or flower symbol in Asian weaving (common from Turkey to China, but especially in Persian and Turkoman rugs). The



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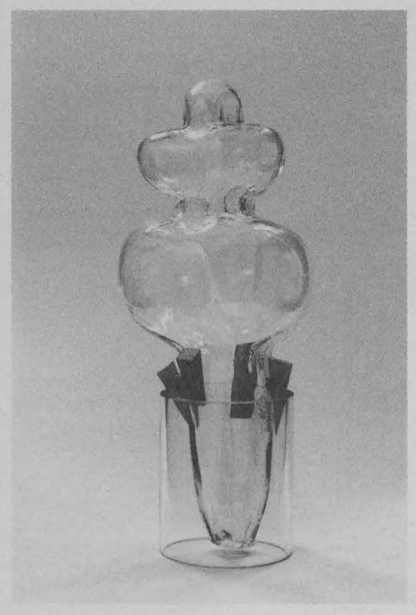

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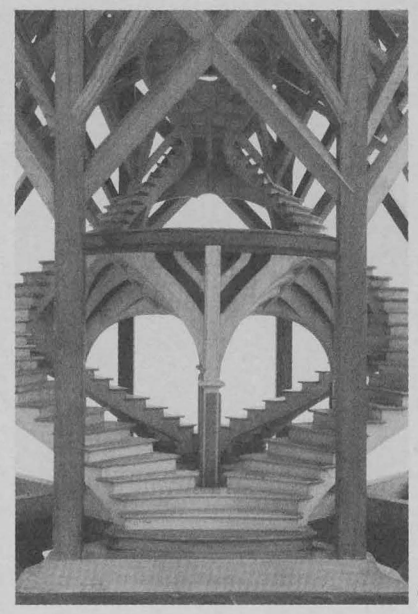

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gul is often so abstract as to be unrecognizable as a flower to an uninitiated observer. Persian carpets themselves may have carried all sorts of cultural influences with them in their vast travels; for example the "garden carpet" could have influenced Japanese gardeners or Moorish gardeners in Spain and Mexico. Carpets carry information because they're knotted, like letters. It's a commonplace that the first idea for a computer came from the mechanical loom. But the most archaic hand loom is also already a tool for thought, and oriental rugs are "good to think with." Abstract patterns are not meaningless decoration, as most art historians seem to believe. They encode, in some symbolic or steganographic sense, huge amounts of information, often about kinship structures, often about natural philosophy—and plant/flower/herb references themselves comprise both botanic lore and a coded "language."

Weaving and knot tying may have their origins in women's mysteries, like pottery and gardening. In tribal-pastoral societies rug making remains a "female" art. The Benevolent Spider is a goddess, always, never a god (as far as I know). Civilization masculinizes weaving, but the male weaver is also an artist, a poet like Kabir, and come the Industrial Revolution the weaver becomes a radical, a Luddite. Perhaps the worst aspect of mechanization was not its horrific effects on community, wealth, health and well-being, but rather the violation of Craft Mysteries involved in the technological replacement of human art by machinic work. The loom workers rebelled under symbolic and even magical leaders such as Robin Hood or General Ned Ludd, with secret oaths and primordial masking rituals—a perfect example of anarchism as "Neolithic conservatism" in Paul Goodman's nice phrase.

Anarchists like William Morris and A.K. Coomaraswamy understood that "in an abnormal society the artist is a special kind of person; in a normal society every person is a special kind of artist." (A.K.C.) Alienated labor, as the Young Philosophical Marx realized (but later forgot), is not just a matter of ownership of means of production vs. wage labor, but of the *meaning* of work, the texture of life as creation of self-validating worth, a tying together or organic unity, as opposed to a schizophrenic and immiserating split between existence drained of meaning by work and work drained of meaning by predatory technopathocratic Kapital.

The paradise of knots must be the ocean. Generations of sailors exercised their creativity inventing knots which are as beautiful as trout-fishing flies (which should also be considered knots-as-art), beautiful as Shinto ritual knots, and yet perfectly useful, logical as any mathematical equation and just as elegant. But no doubt at the beginning of the long unwritten history of maritime topology we would find magical knots, tied to catch breeze spirits, beneficent Sylphs, or to bind storm demons. Ulysses tied and bound to the mast to hear the Sirens' song seems to exemplify this archaic relation, which can also serve as an allegory of Art itself as the binding or fixing of invisible spirits.

A friend of mine was once present at a temple ceremony in Bali where a certain ritual detail was inadvertently muffed, whereupon some demon got loose and ran amok:

> You could see where it was going because it was cutting a path through the crowd of panicking worshippers, leaving